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Title: *Stone of Destiny*

Country of Origin: Canada, UK

Year: 2008

Language: English

Production Companies: Infinity Features Entertainment, The Mob Film Company, Alliance Films, Téléfilm Canada, Scottish Screen National Lottery Fund, The Harold Greenberg Fund

Filming Location: Arbroath, Glasgow, London, Vancouver

Director: Charles Martin Smith

Producers: Andrew Boswell, Alan Martin, Rob Merilees

Screenwriters: Charles Martin Smith, Ian Hamilton

Art Director: Andy Thomson

Editor: Fredrik Thorsen

Runtime: 96 minutes

Cast (Starring): Charlie Cox, Kate Mara, Stephen McCole, Billy Boyd, Robert Carlyle

Synopsis: Based on a true story, *Stone of Destiny* narrates the tale of a daring heist jointly fuelled by the audacity of young minds and the tenacity of old mindsets. Ian Hamilton is a Glasgow University student at the start of the 1950s. Drawn increasingly into the political movement for Scottish Home Rule, a campaign led by the University's charismatic Rector, John MacCormick, Ian concludes that a grand symbolic gesture is required to precipitate a significant constitutional change to what he sees as Scotland's subordinate place within the wider United Kingdom. With the help of a small group of student friends – Bill, Kay, Gavin, and Alan – he hatches a plan to repatriate the Stone of Destiny, the ceremonial rock upon which Scottish monarchs were once anointed, from its place underneath the Coronation Chair at Westminster Abbey in London. The Stone was forcibly removed from Scotland to that location by the English King Edward I in 1296 AD, in an act intended to support his claim that English monarchs possessed the inalienable right to exercise superiority over their Scottish counterparts. After a series of mishaps, mistakes, and miscommunications, Ian and his comrades manage to steal the Stone from Westminster on Christmas Day, first hiding it in a remote part of the English countryside and later placing it on the altar of Arbroath Abbey in northeast Scotland. Spontaneous popular celebrations in Scotland greet the students' actions. As Ian and the others are arrested at Arbroath, he triumphantly informs a journalist that he and his companions are 'the children of Scotland'. Closing inter-titles inform viewers that the students were never prosecuted for their actions and that (in 1996) the British government eventually returned the Stone to Scotland 'on loan'.

Critique: Despite its ostensible appearance as an unapologetically mainstream and upbeat would-be international crowd-pleaser, *Stone of Destiny* in fact struggles painfully to chart a safe course between opposing poles of apolitical sentiment and ideologically complex and contentious matters of Scottish history and contemporary politics. Granted, director Charles Martin Smith's movie is conspicuously full-throated in its conscious celebration of 1950s Scottish nationalist students' youthful ardour and idealism. But, even in this sense, however, the film approaches the Stone of Destiny's story, and what that narrative symbolises within the specific national and political contexts of the British Islands, less as an end in and of itself and more as a vehicle for something else entirely. Strip away the Scottish accents and agitation for self-determination and one is left with a series of heart-warming platitudes—"our children are the future," "the old accept the world as it is, the young imagine the world as it could be"—which have populated innumerable feel-good movies set within countless different national territories. Thus, while Ian's voiceover accompanying *Stone of Destiny*'s opening scene remembers how 'I was young and full of passion for my country', we might plausibly suggest that the movie is far more attracted to, and sure-footed in, its engagement with the universal theme of "young passion" than it is with the accompanying, and more culturally specific, one of "country."

Of course, it must be admitted that this is not how *Stone of Destiny* appears on the surface. Set at the start of the 1950s, the movie freely borrows a range of motifs from what was one of the most prominent and popular British cinematic cycles of the decade in question, the WWII movie. In the case of this modern-day film, however, it is British officials and the British state that assume the role of repressive antagonists, while Scots students are the indomitable guerrilla fighters for freedom from colonial-cum-dictatorial rule. A number of sequences carefully foreground this subversive act of reverse cinematic quotation. An early montage of Ian and Bill plotting the Stone's liberation sees them manoeuvring toy soldiers around a map of Westminster Abbey, in what starts to feel like a remake of *The Colditz Story* (1955) starring an inanimate central protagonist. More pointedly yet, Ian's closing voiceover quotes from the 1320 Declaration of Arbroath, an incredibly important and enduringly influential historical document in which the original Scottish signatories rejected the 'domination of the English', and proclaimed that 'we fight... only and alone for freedom, which no good man surrenders but with his life'. If 1950s British war movies typically portray a heroically principled struggle for freedom conducted from the United Kingdom, *Stone of Destiny* instead frames itself as the story of a similar struggle being waged *between* elements within the UK's two largest constituent nations at the start of the decade in question.

Ultimately, however, the British War Movie parallel also underscores the extent to which *Stone of Destiny* is less confident in the inarguable rightness of its protagonists' nationalist cause than, say, *The Dam Busters* (1953) or *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1958) were in their depictions of patriotic British resistance to Continental fascist tyranny. At times, Ian's ardour is presented as innocuous/incongruous: more than one individual is bemused/amused by the carefully coded phone calls that the young man makes back to Scotland while working undercover in the "enemy capital" of London. In other instances, however, *Stone of Destiny* seems to concede that Scottish nationalism is a political discourse that might conceivably be afflicted by potentially dangerous hyper-masculine,

and even militaristic, tendencies—despite the fact that Ian at one point invokes Ghandi's peaceful protests against British colonial rule in India as a point of reference for what he and his colleagues hope to achieve in/for Scotland. Thus, female protagonists are consistently deployed as supporting players who conveniently constrain and/or channel the fissile physical, emotional, and ideological energies of Scottish men. The idea to repatriate the Stone of Destiny comes to Ian after he sees a press cutting photograph of the famous early-twentieth-century Scottish nationalist Wendy Wood protesting in support of that cause. Ian's mother patiently mediates between him and his authoritarian father, a man who says that he 'nobody could be prouder of Scotland than I am', but who appears to have been emotionally embittered by his acceptance of the Unionist constitutional settlement. John MacCormick ruefully notes that, despite his national prominence and power, his female housekeeper 'has been with the family since I was a boy—and still treats me like one'; it is she who counsels him to reverse his original decision not to support Ian's plan. Alan inspires his temporarily dispirited colleagues by recounting the famous story of the (female) spider that, legend has it, inspired Robert the Bruce in his struggle for Scottish independence in the early fourteenth century: 'six times he watched her spin that web... she never gave up'. Finally, and most obviously of all, Kay consistently punctures Ian's self-importance, telling him at one point that, 'you're not the great high and mighty, you're just another boy with grand ideas'.

In these and other ways, *Stone of Destiny* strives to pre-emptively rehabilitate an ideological discourse and political cause that the film ostensibly eulogises as something self-evidently just and true, a phenomenon that does not require any significant form of qualification or reformation whatsoever. Ironically, however, one potential effect of the movie's covert caveats to, and suggested corrections of, the worldview articulated by Ian is to exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, anxieties about the perilous potential of nationalist political discourses and popular movements within a twentieth- or post-twentieth-century European context. For instance, Ian's climactic self-description of himself and his comrades as 'the children of Scotland' and Kay's earlier description of herself a Scottish mother/Mother Scotland, a young woman who looks forward to spending her life 'working with children and helping them find their way in the world' are both statements that could sit easily with the characteristic rhetoric of the far-right-wing, anti-democratic nationalisms that helped to precipitate WWII. *Stone of Destiny's* lack of significant commercial success—and also, perhaps, the air of the student jape that continues to cling to the Westminster Abbey heist more than half-a-century on from that event—have entailed that this film has to date not received sustained attention from critics of Scottish cinema. But with regard to the enduring potency of the national historical events and icons that the movie invokes, and also to its associated experimentation with a binaristic "them vs. us" form of nationalist politics, it might usefully be compared to one of the most exhaustively (and, sometimes, exhaustingly) discussed of all Scottish-themed movies, Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* (1995).

Jonathan Murray